WALL STREET JOURNAL
20 February 1985

Sen. Goldwater, More Unpredictable Than Ever, Troubles Pentagon Brass on the Military Budget

By DAVID SHRIBMAN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—Barry Goldwater is at the center of the storm again.

This time, the 76-year-old grandfather of modern conservatism has emerged as one of the principals in the battle over the military budget. And already, it is clear that the more things change in national politics, the more Sen. Goldwater remains the same unpredictable figure.

He is, in fact, more unpredictable than ever, and when the retired Air Force Reserve general ascended to the chairmanship of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee this year, no triumphant Sousa marches were blaring in the corridors of the Pentagon. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger has confided privately that he is less concerned about the Democrats in the House than Republicans in the Senate such as Mr. Goldwater.

Barry Goldwater

"We will not be surprised by whatever he does from here on in," says a Pentagon lobbyist who, like other Defense Department officials, requested anonymity so as to avoid the famous Goldwater wrath. "We have to understand that that's Barry Goldwater. We don't have any alternative."

In the course of only two months, Mr. Goldwater has jarred the Pentagon repeatedly. First, he publicly told President Reagan that "my heart has never been in" the MX missile and that the administration shouldn't expect to win congressional approval for continued production of the weapon. Then he suggested that the president should freeze military spending for fiscal 1986, which begins Oct. 1.

A month passed. Mr. Goldwater said he was "not opposed to military cuts" and proclaimed that he was "seeking to close bases." And then, two days later, Mr. Goldwater said that freezing military spending at fiscal 1985 levels would "send a wrong and dangerous signal." The Pentagon's relief at this was tempered by a fear that the senator might change his mind again.

"Barry has enough of the maverick in him to say that something is not a good idea," says Sen. William Cohen of Maine, a Republican colleague on the committee. "The Pentagon can't count on him to be a rubber stamp. He can always surprise you. His conservatism is not knee-jerk."

Just a few months ago, the Pentagon's task was considerably easier. Sen. John Tower of Texas was the Armed Services Committee chairman and made little secret of his intention of being the Pentagon's chief advocate on Capitol Hill. Top Defense Department officials don't make any secret of the fact they were much happier with Mr. Tower, who retired and is now an American arms negotiator, than they are with the more outspoken Sen. Goldwater, now in his final two years in the Senate.

"When a program needs criticizing, I don't hestitate to criticize," Sen. Goldwater says. "In that respect, I guess I'm not what you'd call a politician. I've never particularly worried whether what I said cost me votes or didn't cost me votes. I'm more worried whether if what I'm doing is best for the country."

He believes in the defense of the U.S. if not always in the defense establishment. He made a similar distinction last year when, as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, he was less than deferential to William Casey, the director of Central Intelligence and once, in a letter, told Mr. Casey he was infuriated at the administration's lack of candor on the mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

Sen. Goldwater takes all these contretemps in stride, along with his critics' whispers—he hears them, too—that his celebrated cantankerous nature has worsened with age.

"He's an old, erratic and inconsistent guy," says John Isaacs, executive director of the Council for a Livable World, a lobbying group advocating arms negotiations. "He's past his prime. He's clearly not at the top of his game, and hasn't been that effective."

Mr. Goldwater's response: "I'd ask him to describe 'prime.' Can I go out and run? No. I have two artificial hips and two broken knees. I played too much football, too much basketball, rode too many horses. It all depends on what you consider 'prime.' I sometimes wonder myself whether I'm up to the job, and after I consider it, consider my experience and listen to other people, I think I'm perfectly able to do the job. If I'm not, I'll certainly hear from any number of people."

Troubadour of the West

Sen. Goldwater isn't the bronzed troubadour of the West that he was in 1964, when his presidential campaign was buried in the Lyndon Johnson landslide. But he says his health has "never been better" and exercises daily. On Capitol Hill, he takes the stairs, not the elevator.

"I've known people around here in their 30s who are not able to do anything," he says. "At 76 years of age, I'll take any one of those people who want to criticize my age, and I'll swim them a half-mile race."

Mr. Goldwater's challenge now, however, is the defense budget. Last week he floated a plan to trim the president's military budget by $33 billion over the next three years; congressional budget experts swiftly noted that the Goldwater plan emphasizes savings in future years rather than in 1986, and they raised questions of whether those savings ever would appear. This is an old game, and Sen. Goldwater plays it with aplomb.

He acknowledges that some cuts will be necessary, but is reluctant to specify how much or where. His prejudices, however, are clear. He has flown nearly every aircraft in the American military inventory, including the B-1 bomber. According to one congressional aide, "if it flies, he supports it."

Increasingly Quarrelsome

Denied the presidency and overshadowed by President Reagan as the leading figure in American conservatism, Mr. Goldwater has become increasingly quarrelsome. "He's old enough now," says a Democrat on the committee, "that he enjoys being colorful. And irascible. And iconoclastic."

But Sen. Goldwater also has become something of an elder statesman of the movement and, in recent years, even rather reflective. What surprises him is how fresh conservatism seems now, and how many variations have been spawned.

Continued

2.

"Rather new conservatives feel that the only idea that ever happened has happened to them," he says. "Well, I'm a great believer in this little thing that's inscribed on the steps of the Archives: 'What is past is prologue.' "

For the next two years, however, he intends to concentrate on the future of the nation's defenses and, in all likelihood, will express himself with his usual bluntness.

"I have a temper that, probably, I can control better than I have in the past," he says. "But I have a tendency to say what I think. I don't think I would ever stop doing that. It's gotten me into trouble, but it hasn't been the kind of trouble I couldn't get myself out of."